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AUTHOR Owen, Sam A.
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ABSTRACT

Citing examples from a successful district improvement plan used in Greensville County, Virginia, this paper lists and explains ways a school board can improve teacher competence. After warning that measures that work in one school district may not work in others, the author suggests that school boards should set high district standards, insist on highly competent school board members, district personnel, and superintendents, provide leadership and necessary personnel and financial support, work to stop the erosion of school board power, and give administrators the authority needed to do their jobs. In addition, school boards must establish the qualifications and qualities desired of teachers, effectively evaluate teachers (rewarding the best and firing the worst), ensure there is no racial, sex, or ethnic discrimination in the district, encourage the development of inservice training programs, establish and support instructional objectives, promote high morale among teachers, provide necessary basic and supplementary materials, evaluate instruction through standardized and criterion referenced tests, and fight to ensure adequate teacher compensation in the form of salaries and benefits. In sum, a school board should determine what needs to be improved in the system and do what is needed to improve it. (Author/JM)

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S. A. Owen

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WHAT SCHOOL BOARDS CAN DO TO IMPROVE TEACHER COMPETENCY

Good afternoon. I accepted with a deep sense of humility and honor the challenge of speaking to you on the topic of "What School Boards Can Do to Improve Teacher Competency." This honor I must share with my School Board, my staff, and my school community, because any success I have attained is due in a large measure to the help of these groups. No realistic or intelligent speaker could address you on this topic without feeling profoundly humble because no perfect blueprint can be designed to guarantee that school boards can improve teacher competency.

Let's look at some of the basic questions involved. Just as no satisfactory answer has been given to Pilate's question, "What is Truth?", how many of us can agree on the definition of "What is a competent teacher?" Each of you knows that what is considered a competent teacher in one geographical region might not be so considered in another. Educational needs differ as widely as people differ, but one constant factor exists: students must be given a basic minimum education that equips them to become productive citizens in a democratic society.

Competent teachers have a very difficult task in attempting to teach children in a system where there are no standards. In order for solid learning to occur, a school system should have strong standards supported wholeheartedly by school board members, administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Too often, teacher burn-out has occurred when teachers have become apathetic, frustrated, and "turned off" to the educational process when they have been forced to promote students who had not mastered the minimum skills at their grade level.

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In our own system at Greensville County, Virginia, we determined that the first step toward insuring minimum success was to promote students only when they have satisfactorily mastered the requirements grade by grade in their school experience. We had been negatively spotlighted in the Virginia press in 1973 for being one of the school divisions making the least academic progress in the State. I was incensed with this distinction; my School Board--consisting of Mr. B. B. Vincent, chairman; Mr. L. S. Temple, vice-chairman; Mr. Garland Stith; and Mr. T. J. Barrett--was equally upset. We were eager to do something to change the situation.

With my Board's complete support and encouragement, and the excellent cooperation of my teachers, we embarked on a program in 1974 that ended social promotion and began a trend in improvement that today finds our Division in the 50th percentile of national ranking--a rise of approximately 20-30 percentiles in eight years. Our School Division was proud of the report given last year by our Senior High School Principal who stated that 79.6% of our graduates were preparing to further their education and that 83.3% of those not preparing to further their education possessed a job-entry level skill.

We in Greensville are the first to be aware that our answer to improving educational standards may not be a satisfactory solution for the needs of other school systems. In our County there are citizens who would have preferred some other approach. No doubt, if you consider any problem which you have faced in your own system, you have not been able to convince 100% of your citizens that what you consider a great success is necessarily as good as what you and the majority of your school community take it to be. All of us ha ? our detractors.

Our situation evolved from our deeply felt need to improve a low level of pupil achievement. Our teachers were dedicated in taking the in-service

training provided by our School Board, which supplied all the money we needed to adjust to our changed educational philosophy. The full cooperation of the School Board, the administration and faculty, and the students and parents was required for us to begin reversing our pattern of low achievement.

As I stated at the outset, I do not have answers for all your needs as you seek to improve teacher competence. The impossibility of any speaker having sure-fire answers results from the inability of any individual to know all the diverse educational needs of our Country. If we aim at providing a solid education in basic skills, our colleagues may accuse us of not educating the "whole" child. When we retain a student until he masters the requirements of his grade, we may be criticized for damaging the psyche of the student or even depriving him of his basic rights. I have taken the position that when we pass a student who has not learned, that we have defrauded him--that with social promotion we begin a process of subjecting students to an educational environment in which future mastery of skills is almost impossible--that we are ourselves responsible for the boredom, even despair, that almost certainly produces such negative reactions as inattention, hostility, and the related attitudes that can be summed up by the catch-all phrase, lack of discipline.

You say to me--Ok, your system worked for you in a little county in Southside Virginia that has a 65% black and 35% white population, and the lowest per capita income of any county in Virginia. How can what you did help us in Dallas? Perhaps you are right. What we did in our community may not fit your need. But the way we went about facing our problem might suggest something you can do to face your own. Looking at your group, I see in this audience my boss and the boss of many other division superintendents, but I see more. I also see the institution in the United States that is required by law to employ a qualified administrative and instructional staff to educate

the children of our nation, and to formulate the policy that provides the educational program in your respective school divisions.

How do you view your own role in this process? From my experience of more than thirty years working as teacher, principal, director of instruction, and superintendent, I have worked under varying kinds of school board policy. From the experience I have gained in the process, I would like to make the following statements:

> Citizens should care enough about their children to demand that school board members, whether elected or appointed, be highly competent to carry out their responsibility. In practice what we refer to as the "facts of life" make it very difficult to keep politics out of school policy, but the ideal system should be strictly bi-partisan.

School board members need a sixth sense to be able to provide school programs for which governing boards are willing to provide funds. School boards are caught between governing boards that want to save money for their constituents and teachers who want to keep abreast of inflation. They are further sandwiched between the demanding parents who want their children educated but don't want them upset by programs that demand a certain degree of discipline to insure that education takes place.

A prospective school board member has to be truly outstanding to accept the demands that are to be placed on him. When he has accepted, he can then help to improve teacher competency by <u>insisting</u> that his board fill all vacancies with competent personnel. If no competent applicant is available, substitutes should be used until a competent person can be found. The initial job of hiring is to employ a competent superintendent--one who is the best suited to cope with the needs of the division. He is your technical expert. He has been trained to offer alternate solutions and, if

possible, to solve any need or problem that occurs. Your job is to apply your wisdom in selecting as policy the best of the options he suggests.

The school board should exert the leadership and provide the personnel and financial support necessary to assure that a complete and effective personnel function is operating within the system. Through its policies and regulations the board should provide for systematic evaluation and appraisal of personnel needs. The board must provide well trained administrators who are given the necessary time and resources to develop comprehensive forecasting of personnel needs for continued and envisioned programs.

The board must establish qualifications and qualities it desires of its personnel in the different teaching areas. The board must also provide salary scales which will enable the system to attract the personnel needed.

The board must provide strong leadership which will lead to complete and effective evaluation of all educators including teachers. While I am not fully informed concerning the total program proposed by Superintendent Jack Hunt of the Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix which was discussed in the May, 1980, issue of "The American School Board Journal," I do agree with his basic premise that we should reward the best teachers and fire the worst. This approach means that principals and the administrative staff must be supported in the difficult and time-consuming processes required to be performed to accomplish this goal.

You should make absolutely certain that you give full support to your employees--the entire educational staff. An unsupported superintendent will become incapable of running your schools. He and you must give full support to every teacher. A teacher who does not deserve your support <u>should be fired</u>.

Something, not that you <u>may</u> do, but that you <u>must</u> do, is to insure that in your system no discrimination exists based on race, sex, ethnic, or

religious differences, or any other basis. Full and equal rights for every individual must underlie full competence in employees.

Additionally, school boards must take strong stands to stop and to reverse the trends of the loss of the boards' powers to determine who they may employ and reemploy. Boards must protect their powers in this all important area from labor groups, federal agencies, courts, and local pressure groups. At times, such groups seem more determined to protect the ineffective teachers than to assist in providing good instruction for the students. Secretary of Education Terrel Bell in the March 15th broadcast of "Meet the Press" strongly stated his and the Reagan Administration's intentions of returning the decision making concerning programming, funding, hiring, and evaluating of the educational process to the local school boards. This, I am sure, was welcomed by most school board members and administrators.

School boards must give administration the authority to carry out the responsibilities it delegates. School boards and administrators must understand that all institutions and service-oriented agencies are subject to second guessing and complaints. When a worthwhile goal has been determined and a proper policy enacted by a board, the board must stand squarely behind the administration in implementing that policy, even if special-interest groups are opposed. If the goal and policy are incorrect, the board should change them, but, if the board supports the policy it must be prepared to support the administration in its implementation. Vascillating on issues and sending mixed signals to the teachers, the public, or the administration will adversely impact on the effectiveness of the teaching of children. Effective teaching can be built on clear objectives, clear communications, and consistent patterns of actions by school boards.

The school board should provide necessary funds and encourage the development of valuable in-service training programs. At the beginning of the school year training should be provided to new teachers coming to the

school system. The Greensville County School System utilizes a two-day plan.

The first day the new teachers meet with the Central Office Staff to get acquainted with one another and learn about programs throughout the County. They learn about the development of the Greensville Program; the stress on basic skills; the development, utilization, and recordkeeping of learner objectives; the use of standardized tests and Greensville mastery tests; the humanizing of instruction; special education and referral procedures; discipline techniques; and so forth.

The second day involves teachers working directly with the principal in the school. The principal is able to provide more time as the seasoned teachers have not yet returned to school. The teacher learns about school records and procedures and has time to get acquainted with his or her classroom.

When the other teachers return, there are two or three days scheduled for county meetings to meet targeted needs. Stress is placed on classroom planning and management of student behavior, recordkeeping, use of standardized testing, creative teaching techniques, counseling students, and so forth. Teachers are surveyed in the spring to assess their professional needs as well as those of their school.

In addition, teachers are surveyed to find out what graduate-level courses they desire to have taught in the county. When there is sufficient need, classes are then set up with a college or university to deliver the services.

Professional people at the college level and at the state level sometimes come to the County to provide in-service training to our teachers. Meetings are scheduled either within the individual school or on a county-wide basis.

It is essential to remember that any program desired by a school board must require:

1. strong backing through established policy;
2. enthusiasm verbally demonstrated by board members;
3. the establishment of guidelines for instructing teachers how-to do that which is desired;
4. strong supervision of personnel; and
5. help to be provided to those teachers who are not fulfilling requirements.

The school board should establish and support instructional objectives. This can be accomplished either through comprehensive courses of study--such as a written sequential approach to the teaching of English in grades 8-12--or through the development of learning skills for each discipline. In Greensville County, Virginia, the School Board has adopted learning objectives for each grade K-12 and for each subject. These were written by the teachers and constitute the minimum requirements for a student to pass from one grade level to the next. The teachers keep records on the main categories of information. This procedure allows teachers, supervisors, and parents to know exactly what has been taught. It also provides information to students and parents concerning deficiencies. A third significance of this strategy is teacher accountability, for this procedure will insure that all teachers of any given subject will teach the basic information. However, it will not inhibit the teacher's freedom or creativity because the order for teaching the material and the activities utilized will be the teacher's professional choice. The establishment of a comparable program in any school system would increase teacher effectiveness, and I highly recommend this program to you.

The school board should promote high morale among its teachers. They can accomplish this in numerous ways which vary according to the size and

location of the school system. There are at least two methods, however, that would apply to any county or city across the nation. First, local boards of education should lend their support to educational activities and events to which teachers are willing to devote their time to provide for their students. This support will encourage enthusiasm among the teachers and increase participation among the students. Secondly, local boards of education should reach consensus on important issues which affect the instructional program. Teachers respond positively to directions from principals and supervisors and work together more harmoniously when they are cognizant of a board which collectively and consistently upholds the programs and policies that it has adopted.

School boards must realize the importance and availability of basic and supplementary materials in achieving maximum learning. The Greensville County School Board, in supporting quality education, is constantly updating materials for each department and grade. Free textbooks are provided--thus giving each student a common basic reference for study.

Teachers and principals are provided the opportunity to request instructional materials or media to supplement their area of instruction or management. The Greensville County School Board encourages the use of these materials in implementing instructional strategies that bring about mastery learning.

A school board must recognize the support evaluation of instruction. For without evaluation, the effectiveness of instruction cannot be measured.

The Greensville County School Board makes provisions for norm-referenced (pre/post) and criterion-referenced tests to be administered to its students. In the fall of each year, standardized achievement tests are administered to note areas of strength and weakness for each student. In the spring different forms of the same test are administered to note growth among students.

The Greensville County School Board makes printouts of standardized test results available to teachers for their particular grade and for parents. The teachers are encouraged to use this feedback (results) from the tests to design instructional strategies which will enhance student performance through individualized and group instruction. Through parent-teacher conferences, parents are made aware of their children's academic strengths and weaknesses and suggestions for parental assistance are discussed.

A school board should encourage the use of test results in improving instruction and learning. Provisions have been made by the Greensville County School Board for the development of criterion-referenced mastery tests to measure the learner objectives that were developed by educators in the System.

You should fight diligently to see that teachers' salaries are adequate and that they do not become eroded by inflation. "You get what you pay for" is as true in hiring teachers as it is in any other area.

Compensation is an area that has had a considerable amount of growing concerns by school board members and school administrators for the last decade. Across this nation and in other areas, teacher negotiations, teacher unions, and inflation have made a definite impact on our school systems. Yet, in order to provide the educational programs that are needed by the people we serve, we must recruit and maintain a staff of competent teachers.

When we consider the requirements teachers have to meet to become endorsed to teach, and when we consider the duties and responsibilities that are performed by a competent teacher, we want their compensation for services rendered to equal that of any other person whose requirement, duties, and responsibilities are equal to that of a teacher.

My School Board has retained competent teachers by supporting programs just described and offering the following:

1. salaries competitive with surrounding divisions;

2. a health insurance plan;
3. ten-month salaries on a twelve-month pay period;
4. a cancer insurance policy;
5. summer employment;
6. teacher improvement workshops;
7. annual leave for ten-month employees;
8. re-employment for maternity leave employees;
9. an employee credit union; and so forth.

Offerings such as these have enabled us to hold our staff unless they leave for other reasons. There are human treatments that are used in times of emergencies that encourage teachers to think twice about considering to seek a new job.

I am reminded of a quotation made by a famous philosopher, "No amount of pay ever made a good soldier, a good teacher, a good artist, or a good workman." It is not how much money you spend, but how it is spent.

Each of you is no doubt aware that as school board members you administer the largest passenger transportation system, the largest food service, and the largest personnel organization in the nation. The body of students and teachers comprise a huge portion of the total population in our Country. The challenge to school boards across the nation is one greater than has ever been known before. Teachers are understandably interested in not becoming victims of inflation; they are battle-weary from the increased demands they face from many areas--one of the most significant being a feeling of lack of respect. This is reflected in the poor discipline in students, the lack of parental support in dealing with problems, and the unwillingness of tax payers to support increases that would insure adequate salaries. What is your gut reaction when a superior teacher with fifteen or twenty years experience gets tired of it all? I don't think you can

call it competence if you reflect that you can hire two new ones for what you were paying the one you are losing.

A step that offers a tremendous possibility for improving educational competence is to accept the challenge of assessing the educational erosion that has occurred in many of the nation's schools. Call on each part of the school team--board members, administration, faculty, even representative student leaders--and learn what elements in each division need to be improved. After you determine what needs improvement, cooperate to assemble manpower and funds in whatever way necessary to bring about desired changes.

Today's educational crisis is equal in every way to the economic crisis which has captured the imagination of a majority of our citizens. If school boards will take a positive role of leadership, they can effect the same kind of sweeping changes that have become part of our daily activities such as paying $1.40 per gallon of gas that just two years ago cost less than half that amount. The public demands and is ready to support changes in education that will produce better prepared graduates. These suggestions are extensions of the points I made at the beginning and to which I now return. In summary, you must set the example for the rest of us in the system by being competent. Hire competent staff and then support it in every way possible. Every member of the educational system will know the difference. The students will be different in a very positive way, and the general public will love the difference.